WSIS: The First Summit of the Internet Age?

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The Internet has impacted and transformed most human activities in the last 10 years. The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) shows that diplomatic processes will not be immune to this revolution. A transformation of working methods and a stronger influence and participation of non-governmental actors are already visible evolutions. In retrospect, more than a Summit about the Internet, the WSIS may well be viewed as the first Summit of the Internet Age.

Real revolutions often start quietly. Did Vinton Cerf and Bob Kahn anticipate the few machines they connected through their new Internet Protocol would evolve into a network connecting hundreds of millions of computers? Did Tim Berners-Lee anticipate the HTML language he designed would support applications used by a billion people around the planet? Few people probably realize today that the timid innovations tested in the laboratory of the World Summit on the Information Society can have a bigger impact on the international architecture than most discussions on the reform of the United Nations and the number of seats in the Security Council.

From the onset, WSIS was supposed to be an innovative summit, because of the very nature of the issues it addressed, because of the intention to fully associate civil society and private sector actors and because it was going to be held in two phases. Disappointment by many actors on how little progress was in fact achieved in the official process has been widely chronicled and there is no need to repeat it here. But less attention has been paid to apparently small innovations on the fringes, related to the use of electronic tools that may well bear powerful transformation capacity for the future.

Civil society (CS) actors were the main actors in these experiments and this brief paper is an attempt to chronicle them and to "guesstimate" the impact they might have for the future of

diplomatic negotiations and international governance. Seven aspects – of various importance – are reviewed below.

Civil society mailing lists and web sites

Governments mainly relied upon Geneva-based diplomats to follow the WSIS process. Physical meetings were essential, with relatively few interactions between prepcom sessions in the first phase. Civil society participants on the contrary were scattered around the world and, out of necessity, made extensive use of mailing lists to stay in touch and coordinate. First on existing mailing lists they were subscribed to, then, progressively with the creation of thematic caucuses[1], and various other structures, a wide range of dedicated mailing lists were created for exchanging information, coordinating actions or drafting positions.

Although membership was restricted in theory to civil society participants, several other individuals (including from governments) either discretely subscribed without posting, or followed discussions through the (generally) public archives. In rare cases, well-drafted reports from meetings posted by civil society actors have even been used by some governments with limited human resources to report to their capitals.

Several websites[2] (or sub-sites) dedicated to the WSIS process were also created around specific campaigns (for instance the CRIS Campaign[3]) or themes, or for general-purpose monitoring[4].

Used intensively between and during Prepcoms, mailing lists and CS web sites were vital tools: no effective participation of civil society actors would have been possible without the Internet. Inversely, the very existence of the Internet now removes one of the practical objections to the involvement of non-governmental actors into such United Nations processes, as the need for permanent representatives in a single location is less acute.

In the future, the more intensive use of such tools within governments could trigger a different balance of responsibilities between local embassies and experts in the capital.

Wi-Fi connections in meetings rooms

This may seem a mundane innovation. It actually so transformed the working environment for laptop-equipped civil society actors that the absence of Internet connection in some

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[1] See full list of Civil Society Caucuses at this address: http://www.wsis-cs.org/caucuses.html
[2] See in particular: http://www.wsis-cs.org/, http://www.worldsummit2005.org/ (list of sites at : http://www.worldsummit2003.de/en/web/73.htm)
[3] Cris Campaign web site: http://www.crisinfo.org/
[4] See Association for Progressive Communications: http://www.apc.org/

meetings greatly impaired their capacity to work. Access to the internet allowed real-time access to documentation and information (reducing the amount of paper that had to be carried). But more importantly, it led to innovative uses such as:

- Real-time blogging[5] and reporting during meetings to inform actors who could not make the trip to Geneva;

- Instant communication / coordination between participants in different meetings or even within the same meeting room; and

- Use of mailing lists to send drafts of interventions and solicit comments from remote participants.

Civil society actors went through a painful learning process to establish internal rules, avoid information overload and establish priorities. But altogether, participation in non-Wi-Fi-enabled meetings was considered mostly a waste of time. Public Internet access points in hallways, although useful (for instance for printing) are no substitute for such permanent connection.

On-Screen drafting[6]

This technique, too seldom used during the process, was employed at the Tokyo Regional conference in January 2003 and in a few other instances. These experiences demonstrated:

- a dramatic increase in efficiency as compared to the traditional process of gathering comments in public meetings and having a secretariat produce a new version for the next day; and

- the possibility to conduct a really inclusive drafting process involving all actors

The natural belief is that such a method is only appropriate to refine an already elaborate preliminary draft. But there is evidence of its benefits at all stages, including to produce early, rough document structures in a fluid, interactive and participatory manner.

Still, this method changes the role of people present in the room. In particular, it does not provide diplomats the same capacity for reporting to capitals to get feedback on proposed

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[5] Blogging: the posting of short notes directly on the web, in a form of personal diary
[6] On-screen drafting: technique where a draft text is projected on a wide screen above the Chair and editing is done in real-time, according to comments from the floor

changes – unless, of course, they were to adopt the real-time feedback process allowed by the Wi-Fi connection (see above).

This interactive drafting process could further be expanded by allowing an evolving document to be accessible live through the Internet and by letting present and remote participants directly attach comments on the draft.

Online consultation and commenting on draft documents

In a few cases, online consultations through open forums were organized to gather preliminary input. This was in particular successfully done through the WSIS-Online platform to prepare the Open Forum on Internet Governance organized by the United Nations ICT Task Force in March 2004. This helped identify the key issues and actors before the setting up of the Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG).

Other less successful examples show that participation in such forums trigger significant participation only if :

- there is a critical mass of actors already aware of the process;

- the actors concerned believe their comments will really be taken into account; and

- consultations are launched early enough and articulated with the drafting process.

A more frequent method was the posting of documents and of comments received. This was used on the Executive Secretariat website for official documents but also extensively by the innovative Working Group on Internet Governance, through its dedicated site, in preparation for the open consultations held before each of its meetings. This allows a wide participation and interaction. But it also requires a considerable amount of time to sort through the mass of information posted. Improved methods for outlining key choices and displaying inputs must therefore be designed. The simple posting of documents is a necessary first step, but certainly not sufficient to guarantee efficient engagement of all concerned actors.

Designation of civil society representatives in the WGIG

The Working Group on Internet Governance needed to establish[7] a truly multi-stakeholder format for discussing a wide range of issues related to the notion of Internet governance. Without reducing the responsibility of the United Nation Secretary-General in the

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[7] See paragraph 13 in the Plan of Action at : http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/official/poa.html

designation of its members, a mechanism was needed to allow civil society to identify and suggest acceptable candidates to represent itself within the group.

At the initiative of the Civil Society Internet Governance Caucus, and in a very limited time frame, requests for nominations were sent to the different caucus lists and a "Nomination Committee" (or NomCom[8]) of four people[9] reviewed the proposed names, establishing a limited list with the following criteria in mind:

- Regional and gender balance;

- High level of competence and recognized experience in the field;

- Balance between technical and policy-oriented people; and

- Capacity to facilitate and moderate debate rather than advocates of a single position (however legitimate).

Subsequent interactions with the Executive Coordinator, Markus Kummer, led to the decision of the United Nations Secretary-General to integrate all suggested people as members of the WGIG. This gave more legitimacy to the designated members and, as a result, to the Working Group itself (where they actually, in the following months, assumed a large part of the workload).

Time allowing, more iterative consultations within civil society lists could have further improved the designation process. But even as such, this approach was a major improvement over traditional methods where "civil society representatives" are usually chosen unilaterally by entities in charge of the creation of the group. Two major lessons already emerge:

- This is a first step towards a key principle: civil society members of multi-stakeholder processes or working groups should (and can) be designated by civil society itself

- Only the internet allows a transparent and inclusive selection process for civil society actors that cannot use the simple region-based elections of government.

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[8] The concept of this NomCom and its methods drew heavily from the experience of many IG Caucus members who participated in similar mechanisms in IETF or ICANN

[9] NomCom members pledged not to be members of the WGIG in order to guarantee independence

The successful formation of this Working Group is a stepping stone for a replication of this process in other cases.

Testing tools within the WGIG

Formed outside of the strict rules of procedures of the Summit, under the auspices of the United Nations Secretary-General, the WGIG was able to explore innovative working methods, drawing from the current practices in the Internet Community fora.

In particular, real-time on-screen minutes[10] were introduced during the third open consultation in April 2005. This proved highly useful to facilitate understanding of interventions by all participants. It also greatly enhanced transparency and accountability as minutes were immediately posted online.

Some additional experiments, using more or less recent technologies, included:

- Webcasting of meetings (although this was also used in parts of the official process of ITU meetings)

- Video-conferencing (in particular in connection with a distant regional meeting)

- Collaboratory platforms (in particular with the support of the Internet Governance Project at Syracuse University)[11]

- Use of the Plone platform for posting documents

- Wikis

Although limited in scope, these tests (largely facilitated by civil society experts within the group) played an important capacity building function for governments not familiar with recent evolutions in social software.

WSIS-Online: leveraging the Summit events and helping actors connect

The first phase of WSIS in Geneva was held in an original format, using a single venue for three categories of activities: a plenary conference (interventions by heads of States or Governments), a series of more than 200 conferences and an exhibit hall (ICT4D) presenting more than 300 projects.

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[10] Real-time stenographic notes of all interventions are projected on a wide screen above the Chairperson
[11] See more information on Policy Collaboratories and the work of Derrick Cogburn at Syracuse University: http://cotelco.syr.edu

At the initiative and with the support of the Swiss authorities, host of the first phase, a highly interactive online platform (www.wsis-online.net) was set up to present all these activities and organizations and help participants connect around their issues of interest. Indexing actors, events, organizations and projects along the themes of the Plan of Action, it provided a virtual extension of the actual event.

To maintain and develop this platform during the period between Geneva and Tunis, a Swiss-based association was set up with the support of the French government, the Fondation Charles Leopold Mayer and other stakeholders, under the Presidency of Ambassador Daniel Stauffacher.

Used in 2004 to host online consultations on Internet Governance as well as on Financing Mechanisms, it has progressively evolved into a community platform for all actors involved in the implementation of the WSIS Action Plan. Allowing them to register the events they organize or the projects they manage, and to find other actors interested in the same issues, its main purpose is to foster interaction, help the formation of thematic networks and prepare the key phase of implementation after the Tunis Summit. It is a needed complement to the reporting mechanism undertaken by the Executive Secretariat.

Building on the experience of the Geneva phase, wsis-online.net will also provide participants in the Tunis conferences and exhibition (ICT4all) with high-level functionalities to help them connect and showcase their activities. With the support of additional stakeholders and some existing thematic networks (for instance in the scientific community), the objective is to make WSIS "the most interactive United Nations Summit ever".

This rapid review of the various uses of the Internet and digital tools during the WSIS process does not imply that they will replace all physical meetings and traditional processes nor that they have no drawbacks. Information overload on mailing lists, the difficulty to implement multilingualism, the limits to participation in countries where Internet access is rare, among other issues, are not to be overlooked.

But altogether, the Internet already had a deep impact on how this Summit was conducted, its Agenda, and the role civil society was able to play in it. The Internet will certainly have an even bigger role in the upcoming phase: governments cannot implement the Plan of Action alone and the active and coordinated engagement of thousands of actors around the world is needed.

WSIS is a laboratory, a test bed for new multi-stakeholder mechanisms. Any follow-up mechanism should draw lessons from the above experiments to set the right combination of physical meetings and online tools, as well as new rules of participation and interaction

between all actors. In particular, the creation of the innovative WGIG and the setting-up of a community platform (wsis-online.net) to help actors connect are stepping stones to a new format for international processes.

WSIS may still look to many as a summit like others. In reality, it brings the germ of a paradigm shift. While addressing Internet governance, it may be laying the foundations for a "Governance for the Internet Age", that will allow full participation of all actors, a new level of Democracy.